

## "Never again!" says Germany's anti-national movement' [Review] Robert Ogman (2012) Against the nation: anti-national politics in Germany

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## **“Never Again!” Germany’s anti-national movement**

**Book review of *Against the Nation: Anti-National Politics in Germany*, by Robert Ogman, New Compass Press**

**Raphael Schlembach**

Robert Ogman’s short book charts an important point in the development of the radical Left in Germany, just before and after the country’s reunification. It introduces and assesses a heterogeneous anti-national social movement that at first swam against the stream of nationalist euphoria in 1990 and that in subsequent years fought against a tide of resurgent xenophobic violence.

Ogman shows how the demise of real-existing socialism that culminated in the collapse of the German Democratic Republic not only signalled the triumph of neoliberal capitalism; it also initiated a new phase of aggressive and xenophobic nationalism in the reunified Federal Republic. While the nation served elite-purposes to smooth over labour conflicts and class interests, this was also echoed as nationalism from below. The euphoria that accompanied the new nation-building process was soon followed by significant increases in xenophobic sentiments and violence, so terrifyingly captured in the pogroms of Rostock and Hoyerswerda, when neo-Nazis and locals joined forces in driving asylum seekers from their towns.

It was in this context that a distinct, and rather unique, anti-national movement began to take shape. Ogman focuses on two campaigns of the time.

The first, which at its highpoint in 1990 attracted more than 20,000 people to an anti-national demonstration in Frankfurt, was the radical Left’s response to what it perceived as the ‘annexation’ of the former GDR by the Federal Republic. Using a phrase by the popular singer Marlene Dietrich, the campaign called itself ‘Never Again Germany!’ Somewhat hopelessly, it opposed reunification outright, with many activists fearing a geopolitical and economic strengthening of Germany that could pave the way for something akin to a Fourth Reich.

The second, after reunification, arose as a coalition of anti-racist activists that joined together in the ‘Something Better than the Nation’ campaign against a seemingly national consensus of xenophobia. Here again, it wasn’t the state alone that forced a tightening of asylum laws. The campaign highlighted how wide sections of society were actively involved in at times violent attacks on refugees and migrant workers.

Both campaigns brought together activists from a variety of backgrounds, former members of the Greens, Maoist organisations, Autonome and squatters. Ogman suggests that its heterogeneity also led to the movement’s decline. Yet, many of its principles live on in today’s German Left and still inform current campaigning.

While the sections on these specific campaigns are rather short, the non-German reader might find Ogman's contextualisation of particular interest, and indeed it describes an aspect of German history that is often conveniently forgotten. It looks at the support for xenophobia not just amongst the reconstituting far Right but also among wide sections of the German public, some of whom joined in with acts of violence. Ogman argues that the anti-national campaigns rightly broke with more traditional left-wing attitudes towards the nation. They were questioning of notions such as 'the people', and instead grappled with the problematic that broad sections of the population had been complicit in supporting and even enacting nationalist and racist ideology. For Ogman, this is not just a matter of history. His point is that we can find lessons for the Anglophone Left today.